

By JAMES H. CONE

**“God Our Father, Christ Our Redeemer,  
Man Our Brother”:  
A Theological Interpretation  
of the A. M. E. Church**

What we think is connected with the conditions of our lives. Many scholars today believe that all knowledge is determined by social conditions and is therefore subject to error. The implication is that no one can claim that his or her thinking is completely objective. What people regard as true and real depends partly or wholly upon how they perceive their social and political interests.

This is true even of our thinking about God. What people think about God and Jesus Christ cannot be separated from their social, economic, and political existence. This statement may be shocking to theologians and other church people who would like to believe that *religious* ideas are somehow purer than other ideas and less influenced by worldly circumstances. But if they read the Bible carefully, they discover that divine revelation, so far from exempting theology from worldly circumstance, *requires* our involvement in the world in order to perceive God's truth.

The God of the Bible is not a philosophical principle, not an absolute idea as defined in Greek philosophy. The biblical God is the God of history whose truth is known in the liberation of slaves from bondage. Truth therefore is not an idea but a divine event which invades human history and bestows freedom in wretched places. Knowledge about this truth depends upon our socio-political situation, that is whether we are on the side of God's liberating presence or on the side of the status quo. If the latter, then there is no way for us to understand the meaning of biblical faith. Faith is inseparably connected with obedience to the God of history. Unless we are prepared to live according to the claims of faith, then we cannot understand the meaning of its truth. Because Pharaoh was not in the socio-political situation for the hearing of divine truth, he did not understand the

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In January of 1974, the Bishops of the AME Church invited the author to serve as a leader at their Retreat in Galveston, Texas which focused on the theme "The Mission of the Church". The following year, February 1975, the AME Bishops were invited to hold their Retreat at Union Theological Seminary in N.Y. They requested the author to address himself to the specific and unique *theology* of the AME Church. The present article was written for that occasion. Following that Retreat, he was requested by Bishops John H. Adams, H. H. Brookins, Frank Reid and the Committee on Black Papers for permission to use this article as the theological foundation for the various position papers that were prepared for the AME General Conference in Atlanta, June 1976. This paper, therefore, was prepared for the AME Church as a discussion starter for the formulation of its Richard Allen Creed.



meaning of God's proclamation to "Let my people go." The same was equally true of the people of Israel when God spoke through the prophets, insisting that the poor were not created for injustice and humiliation. In the New Testament, Jesus made a similar point: "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick; I came not to call the righteous, but sinners." (Mark 2:17 RSV.) Because the Kingdom of God involves a total commitment to the liberating presence of Jesus, people who occupy a certain socio-political security in this present world cannot make the needed leap of faith into God's coming future. Only the poor, those with nothing to lose and everything to gain, can hear the truth and thus live according to its claim upon humanity.

If what we say about the connection between thought and social existence is correct, then the theology of the A.M.E. Church as defined by its motto, "God Our Father, Christ Our Redeemer, Man Our Brother," must be analyzed within the social and political context of the Church's origin. This motto cannot and ought not to mean the same thing as the white Methodist church when it speaks of God, Jesus Christ, and brotherhood. To be sure, the AME Church accepted the polity and doctrines of Methodism as defined by John Wesley and the articles of religion. But that is no evidence that the A.M.E.'s doctrines of God, Jesus Christ, and humanity are the same as those of the white Methodists. If that were true, Richard Allen never would have walked out of St. George, and A.M.E.'s today would have no grounds for their continued separation from the white Methodists.

The reason why most people think that there is no doctrinal difference between the A.M.E. Church and white Methodism is that they have defined Christian doctrines according to the conceptualization of white theological textbooks. Since there are no existing theological textbooks on A.M.E. doctrine, people may conclude that the A.M.E.'s are a church without a theology. (Unfortunately many A.M.E.'s themselves have internalized and accepted that assumption.) But I contend that the meaning of a people's faith is not conclusively decided by what they write in textbooks or even by the conceptual content of their sermons. Faith is defined by obedience. That is, I know what your words mean by what you do. Meaning is defined by action. Since Richard Allen and Daniel Payne did not act the same way as their white contemporaries, I must conclude that they invested in the words "God", "Christ", and "brotherhood" with different meaning from those of the white preachers of the Methodist Church. It is with this assumption in mind that we search out the original meaning of the A.M.E. Church motto: "God Our Father, Christ Our Redeemer, Man Our Brother."

## I. GOD OUR FATHER

To know what the founders of the A.M.E. Church meant by this phrase, it is necessary to penetrate the social and political circum-



stances that brought their existence into being. For Richard Allen, God was not a philosophic idea but a spiritual presence in his life that affirmed the dignity of his personhood in the midst of slavery. He speaks of his encounter with God with apocalyptic imagination: "I cried . . . , and all of a sudden my dungeon shook, my chains flew off . . . [for] the Lord had heard my prayers and pardoned all my sins."<sup>1</sup> This experience made it impossible for Allen to remain a slave and to accept a second class membership in St. George Methodist Church. The fullest implication of his conversion experience may not have been known to Allen at the time, and he perhaps did not have the theological sophistication to articulate the depths of its meaning. But if thought is connected with action, then we can observe his actions as a clue to the meaning of Allen's conversion. He bought his freedom, entered the ministry, and later founded the first independent Black Methodist Church as a protest against segregated worship. Bishop Frederick Talbot's description of Allen as "God's Fearless Prophet"<sup>2</sup> is accurate and appropriate, because Allen took the risk to make a distinctive theological assessment of God's presence in the world. For Allen, God was the Father of all the peoples of this earth. Why then did white "Christians" treat blacks as second-class people of God? The God of the Bible is no respecter of persons.

Richard Allen's understanding of God as the God of blacks as well as whites was the key to his refusal to accept white people's domination of black people. If God is the God of all, how then can segregation and slavery be justified? The God of the Bible is the ground of freedom and the source of black people's affirmation of their personhood. Reflecting on the St. George experience, Allen said it well: "we all went out of the church in a body, and they were no more plagued with us in the church."<sup>3</sup>

Bishop Daniel Payne — from whom the motto, "God Our Father, Christ Our Redeemer, Man Our Brother," is derived — recognized the contradiction between the Christian God and American slavery. Not only could he not understand how professed Christians could own slaves, but he also questioned the justice and righteousness of God. In western theology and philosophy, this contradiction is called the problem of theodicy and many hours have been expended trying "rationally" to reconcile God's absolute goodness and power with the presence of evil in the world. But for Bishop Payne and the black constituency he represented, black suffering and the absurdities of faith arising out of it were not mainly problems of reason in an abstract sense of the term. The contradiction of black suffering with faith in the God of the Bible did not have its origin in the reading of the philoso-

<sup>1</sup> Richard Allen, *The Life Experience and Gospel Labors* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1960), p. 15, 16.

<sup>2</sup> See Frederick Talbot, *God's Fearless Prophet: The Story of Richard Allen*, a pamphlet.

<sup>3</sup> Allen, *op. cit.*, p. 25.



phies of Augustine and David Hume. The contradiction of black suffering with the Christian faith happened in black people's experience of God at prayer meeting on Sunday night and of the slave driven in the field on Monday morning. Payne wondered how these two realities could be reconciled.

Sometimes it seemed as though some wild beast had plunged his fangs into my heart, and was squeezing out its life-blood. Then I began to question the existence of God, and to say: "If he does exist, is he just? If so, why does he suffer one race to oppress and enslave another, to rob them by unrighteous enactments of rights, which they hold most dear and sacred?" Sometimes I wished for the lawmakers what Nero wished — "that the Romans had but one neck." I would be the man to sever the head from its shoulders. Again said I: "Is there no God?"<sup>4</sup>

These are the words of a man who could not accept slavery as consistent with God as the creator of all peoples. Slavery must mean that God does not exist. But Payne could not accept atheism. It was too easy, a rational cop-out. It merely justifies the right of the powerful to rule over the weak. Only people who are in power or who have resigned themselves to accept oppression can accept a rational solution to the problem of evil. Furthermore, Payne was a man of struggle who had already encountered God in the fight for freedom. The experience of God cannot be invalidated merely because God's behavior does not measure up to our rational conceptions of justice. Such an idea removes the sense of mystery and awe from divine presence and places our rationality above God. It was this sense of divine mystery which Bishop Payne affirmed in the context of black suffering, knowing that God, the Father of all, will effect his justice in his own future.

But then [writes Payne] there came into my mind those solemn words: "with God one day is as a thousand years and a thousand years as one day. Trust in him, and he will bring slavery and all its outrages to an end." These words from the spirit world acted on my troubled soul like water on a burning fire, and my aching heart was soothed and relieved from its burden of woes.<sup>5</sup>

With Allen and Payne as its early leaders, the A.M.E. Church affirmed black dignity by insisting that the God of the Bible was the creator and father of all peoples. This assumption was the starting point of its theology, giving black people the courage to live as children of the Almighty by refusing to accept second class status in the white Methodist Church.

Unfortunately the contemporary A.M.E. Church has not always remained true to the faith of its mothers and fathers. Let's face it: We as a church have forgotten about the fatherhood and the motherly role that God has played in the lives of black people. Like Israel who forgot about the God of the Exodus, and began to run after the baal gods of Canaan, we too have pursued the God of white religion

<sup>4</sup> Daniel A. Payne, *Recollections of Seventy Years* (New York: Arno Press, reprint, 1969), p. 28.

<sup>5</sup> Quoted in *Ibid.*, p. 28.



and the faith of the rich. Unlike Allen who knew that God has a special concern for the poor and the black, we are often embarrassed by our blackness and no longer appreciate the *African* origin of our faith. Unlike Bishop Henry M. Turner, who in 1898 asserted that "God is a Negro," we are ashamed to define God as black. How can black people know that God is their father, if he is not black? How can the poor know that poverty is an injustice against God, if God is not a father for the fatherless and a mother for the motherless? The problem with the contemporary A.M.E. Church is that its ministers are more concerned about who is going to be elected a bishop in 1980 than about the poor blacks who are being oppressed and humiliated in racist America. I do not intend to tell the bishops and the ministers how to run the Church. But to become an A.M.E. Bishop or to accept the call into God's ministry is to accept a special responsibility defined by the Scripture and the tradition of Allen and Payne. If we take the Scripture seriously as defined by these Black Fathers, what else can we say except the A.M.E. Church "ain't what it used to be." It used to be a church whose primary mission was to liberate black people from the conditions of oppression. It used to be a church in which the office of the Bishop was one of service. Daniel Payne turned down the invitation to become a bishop in 1848 because he did not feel himself worthy. He was elected in 1852 not because he sought the office but because his brethren insisted that he was the person for the job. Can you imagine some A.M.E. minister turning down the bishopric today because he felt unfit? Unfortunately, it seems that the beginning and the end of the A.M.E. Church's significance is in the office of the Bishop. This office has often taken the place of God and usurped his fatherhood over the people. Therefore what the AME Church needs is to re-think its mission in the light of the fatherly role of God so that it can better serve as the liberating agent of God in the world.

## II. CHRIST OUR REDEEMER

Allen, Payne, and the other founders of the A.M.E. Church had something specifically in mind when they affirmed that Christ was their Redeemer. They understood this affirmation as connected with the fatherhood of God. God the Father of all humankind sent his only begotten Son into the world in order that we might be saved. That is Christ came in order to liberate us from sin and to reconcile us to God. Conversion was the actualization of this experience of salvation.

The founders of the A.M.E. Church held no church councils on christology and soteriology. Unlike the bishops at Nicea, Constantinople, and Chalcedon, the A.M.E. bishops did not ask about the ontological status of the Son's relation to the Father or whether the Holy Spirit proceeded from the Father alone or the Father and the Son. Neither did they ask about the status of the humanity and divinity



in Jesus' person. The A.M.E. Church has not produced theologians who reflected on the doctrine of the atonement as found in Anselm, Abelard, and more recently in Gustaf Aulén of Sweden. Such problems as defined by the early church councils or by contemporary theologians on christology and soteriology were not and are not today the problems of black people.

Although I respect what happened at Nicea and Chalcedon and the theological input of the early church fathers on christology; but that source alone is inadequate for finding out the meaning of black folks' Jesus. It is all right to say as did Athanasius that the Son is *homoousios* (one substance with the Father), especially if one has a taste for Greek philosophy and a feel for the importance of intellectual distinctions. But the *homoousios* question is not a black question. Blacks do not ask whether Jesus is one with the Father or divine and human, although the orthodox formulations are implied in their language. They ask whether Jesus is walking with them, whether they can call him up on the telephone of prayer and tell him all about their troubles.

It is not that blacks did not regard the *homoousios* question as important. They simply did not know that Jesus' status was in question. If the christological question were put to them, I am sure that the average A.M.E. Church member would respond something like this: "Go on, boy, and leave me alone. I know who Jesus is, and you're not going to confuse me with your education. I know who Jesus is because I just talked with him, and you come asking me all them silly questions about. . . . What's that big word you used? Homo what? Don't you let your books get you confused, boy!"

This comment, constructed from a conversation I had with a black church member, should not be taken as a put-down of education or as a belittling of disciplined theological thinking. (It is not un-Christian or anti-black to attend college and seminary.) The comment was merely an affirmation that one does not meet Jesus through reading books. One meets him in the concreteness of life, in the midst of suffering and through the struggle of liberation. Allen and Payne met Jesus in the contradictions of life, where the "load was heavy" and the "way was narrow." To be sure, Athanasius' assertion about the status of the Son in the Godhead is important for the church's continued christological investigations. But we must not forget that Athanasius' question about the Son's status in relation to the Father did not arise in the historical context of slave codes and overseers. If he had been a black slave in America, I am sure he would have asked a different set of questions. He might have asked about the status of the Son in relation to slave holders. Perhaps the same is true of Martin Luther's concern about the ubiquitous presence of Jesus Christ at the Lord's Table. Without diminishing the importance of Luther's theological concern I contend that if he had been born a black slave and had experienced the brutalizing presence of white society in the "land



of the free and the home of the brave," I am sure that his first concern would not have been the manner of Jesus' presence at the Lord's Table but the manner of his presence in the slave's cabin. Could the slaves expect Jesus to be with them as they tried to survive the whip and pistol.

My point is that one's social and historical context decide not only the questions we address to God and Jesus but also the mode or form of the answers given to the questions. Therefore to understand what the A.M.E. Church meant by the phrase "Christ Our Redeemer," we need not search the records of the ancient councils. Rather we must look at the historical context of black slavery and see how black people read the Bible in the light of their slavery. Allen and Payne did not have the luxury of debating about Jesus, but they struggled with Jesus, trying to figure out whether the Lord would redeem black people from the pains of slavery. Therefore, for these early black ministers, Jesus was not the object or product of philosophical speculation. He was a spiritual and historical presence in black life, bestowing upon black people the strength to "keep on keepin' on," because they had "to make the best of a bad situation." Jesus was the divine power in their situation who could smooth out the rough places in their lives. They sometimes called him "wheel in the middle of a wheel," "the Rose of Sharon," the "lily of the valley" and "the bright and mornin' star." In the words of an old spiritual:

He's King of Kings, and Lord of Lords,  
Jesus Christ, the first and the last  
No man works like him.

This is the christological matrix in which the A.M.E. Church's view of Jesus as the Redeemer ought to be understood. Christ as our Redeemer means that he is black people's liberator. With Jesus as the Captain of the "Old Ship of Zion," we are set free to struggle against injustice and oppression. Let us hope that the contemporary A.M.E. Church will return to its tradition by taking seriously Jesus' claim that he came "to preach good news to the poor," "to proclaim release to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind," and "to set at liberty those who are oppressed" (Luke 4:18 RSV).

### III. MAN OUR BROTHER

Brotherhood and sisterhood are grounded in the fatherhood and the motherly presence of God in black life. If God is the father of all and is present as a mother for the motherless, then all people are in fact created equal, that is, as brothers and sisters before God and humanity. If Jesus Christ is the redeemer and the liberator of all, then the distinctions between blacks and whites make no sense from a theological or a political standpoint. The brotherhood and sisterhood of the divine Spirit was the source of Daniel Payne's affirmations:



I am opposed to slavery, not because it enslaves the black man, but because it enslaves *man*. And were all the slaveholders in this land men of color, and the slaves white men, I would be as thorough and uncompromising an abolitionist as I now am; for whatever and whenever I may see a being in the form of a man, enslaved by his fellowman, without respect to his complexion, I shall lift up my voice to plead his cause, against all claims of his proud oppressor; and I shall do it not merely from the sympathy which man feels towards suffering man, but because *God, the living God*, who I dare not disobey, has commanded me to open my mouth for the dumb, and plead the cause of the oppressed.<sup>6</sup>

Payne's protest against slavery was not grounded in any belief in the essential goodness of humanity as defined by the 18th century Enlightenment and articulated by many white abolitionists in 19th century America. Payne's condemnation was derived from the biblical view that God created all peoples as brothers and sisters. Therefore no race of people have the right to enslave another. Reflecting on Psalm 8, he writes:

This being God created but little lower than the angels, and crowned him with glory and honor; but slavery hurls him down from his elevated position, to the level of brutes! Strikes this crown of glory from his head, and fastens upon his neck the galling yoke! and compels him to labor like an ox, through summer's sun and winter's snow, without renunciation.<sup>7</sup>

The theme that all peoples are brothers and sisters was a dominant theme in the A.M.E. Church through the 19th century, during and after legal slavery. Payne felt so strongly about the equality of people that he suspended one of his ministers for refusing to accept a white woman into the membership of an A.M.E. Church.

With a different emphasis, the brotherhood and sisterhood of people before God was the ground of Bishop Henry M. Turner's protest against the Georgia House of Representatives for expelling black members from that body.

I wish the members of this House to understand the position I take. I hold that I am a member of this body. Therefore... I shall neither fawn nor cringe before any party, nor stoop to beg them for my rights. Some of my colored fellow members, in the course of their remarks, took occasion to appeal to the sympathies of Members on the opposite side, and to eulogize their character for magnanimity. It reminds me very much... of slaves begging under the lash. I am here to demand my rights, and to hurl thunderbolts at the men who would dare cross the threshold of my manhood.<sup>8</sup>

Then Turner moves to a deeper theological level and sees the connection between his humanity and God's fatherhood.

You may expel us, gentlemen, by your votes, today; but, while you do it, remember that there is a just God in Heaven, whose All-Seeing Eye beholds alike the acts of the oppressor and the oppressed, and who,

<sup>6</sup>"Bishop Daniel Alexander Payne's Protestation of American Slavery," *Journal of Negro History*, Vol. LII (1967), p. 60.

<sup>7</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 60.

<sup>8</sup>Cited in Herbert Aptheker (ed.), *A Documentary History of the Negro People in the United States*, Vol. II (New York: Citadel Press, 1968), p. 69.



despite the machinations of the wicked, never fails to vindicate the cause of Justice and the sanctity of His own handiwork.<sup>9</sup>

Would that we had more A.M.E. ministers and Bishops who understood the gospel with the insights of Henry M. Turner. Why is it that we have so many ministers who do not understand the significance of Black Theology, Black Christ, and Black God when the A.M.E. Church is African in origin, and its early leaders were unqualifiedly identified with the liberation of black people? Why is it that the blackness of our faith is not expressed in our creeds, polity, sermons, and songs? It appears that we really believe the white contention that A.M.E. Church is nothing but a white church with black members. As long as we express our faith like white people, repeating their creeds and singing their songs, and entering into consultation with them about church union with little or no reference to color in the definition of our faith, then black radicals are correct in their contention that Christianity is the white man's religion and it must be destroyed along with the white oppressor. I have contended otherwise by pointing to Allen, Payne, and Turner. But, unfortunately, there is little evidence coming from the contemporary A.M.E. Church which contradicts the opinion of the radicals' observation. I contend that the contemporary A.M.E. Church must make a decision about its mission. Either it should define its mission with the poor and the black by emphasizing God's will to liberate the oppressed from bondage or else it should define its mission in terms of the cultural and political values of white America. By refusing to accept the first alternative, the church automatically opts for the second. I think the first alternative is the only choice for people who take seriously the Scripture and the A.M.E. Church tradition. To create a church that is identified with the value-system of America is to deny everything that Scripture represents. To people who claim that they do not see the God of the Bible as the One who is for the liberation of the oppressed and against the proud and the mighty, then I can only say that we must be reading different Bibles.

I would make the same claim for the A.M.E. Church during the time of Allen, Payne, and Turner. Were they to re-appear on the scene in 1977, they would not recognize the Church they helped to create. They founded a church for the liberation of poor black people. Thus the choice of name, The *African* Methodist Episcopal Church, was no accident. The name reflected the members of a church who believed that God is the father of all, that Christ is the redeemer of all, and that all peoples are brothers and sisters in the faith. If this theme represents the spirit and ethos of the present-day A.M.E. Church, then we are doing a good job of keeping it a secret. Because I believe in the A.M.E. Church, I challenge us all to renew our spirit by going back to the "old time religion" of Allen and Payne, both of whom represent the liberating force of God's presence among black people.

<sup>9</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 571.